Afghanistan and the Revolution in Canadian Foreign Policy

Alexander Moens

As the War on Terror has become the decisive new departure in America's foreign policy since September 11, 2001, so has the war in Afghanistan become a turning point in Canadian foreign policy. Unlike the sudden change in American foreign policy, the war in Afghanistan is making a gradual impact on numerous Canadian fronts, including the re-orientation of foreign policy from a global human security agenda to a hard power interest of defeating the insurgency in the South of Afghanistan. This military commitment has brought Canada back to the fighting core of the NATO Alliance, revived the Canadian Armed Forces, and has become a cornerstone in Ottawa's attempt to rebuild relations with the United States. Foreign policy is not traditionally a key platform in Canadian elections. However, the national debate about what to do in Afghanistan ranks among the top issues that will determine the outcome of next election.

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After the end of the Cold War, Canada continued to participate in UN peacekeeping missions and NATO operations, but there was no overall strategic sense about Canadian foreign priorities.

The drift was halted with the arrival of Lloyd Axworthy as the new foreign minister in 1996. Canada began to develop a new foreign policy based on a soft power variant called human security. It replaces the concept of national interest with the perspective of assisting individuals and groups at conflict inside failing states. Canada played a pivotal role in rallying the global network of NGOs and willing governments to sign a new treaty on banning the production, sale and use of anti-personnel landmines. Canada also played a key role in the negotiations that led to the International Criminal Court in 1998. Talks on banning small arms exports and protecting war-affected children were also started.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 generated the most focused renewal in American security policy since the onset of containment in the early 1950s. By defining the new priority as an international war on terror, the US pushed hard against the working consensus among Western countries that fixing failed states could best be done with a mixture of human security and development policies. The Axworthy agenda gradually moved to the background in Canada's foreign policy.¹

Canada's commitment to 'light' UN peacekeeping missions also began to dry up. Only 60 Canadian personnel were deployed in UN missions in 2006. In its place has come a robust commitment to creating security conditions in Afghanistan. The switch away from human security began during the Paul Martin government. In 2004, for the first time ever, Canada issued a national rather than an international security policy. It put the protection of Canadians and Canada as an unambiguous priority. The International Policy Statement issued in 2005 emphasizes stronger Canadian defence, more cooperation with the United States and renewal in expeditionary capabilities.²

The launch of transformation in Canadian Forces and command structure coincided with a US-led push to revitalize NATO. Canada became a strong proponent of the various schemes to revitalize NATO, including the Allied Transformation Command in Norfolk and the NATO Response Force.

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Canada was among the first nations to commit troops, civilian advisers, and reconstruction aid to Afghanistan after US forces toppled the Taliban in late 2001. In 2003, Canada was instrumental in turning the ISAF operations from an ad hoc coalition into a NATO-led and commanded mission. Canada volunteered to deploy a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to Kandahar in August 2005. In 2006, a Canadian battle group joined the United States and Britain in war-fighting operations (Operation Medusa) against the Taliban and other insurgents. Canada has pledged to keep some 2,500 troops in the south till early 2009.

Canada has paid a high price in human lives with the loss of 54 soldiers and 1 diplomat by May 2007. Over 200 soldiers have been injured, 73 very seriously. The military cost of the Canadian mission in the south of approximately $400 million in the 2005-2006 fiscal year, rose steeply to $1.5 billion the next fiscal year (out of a total of $1.9 billion for all CF operations). The estimated total cost of Canada’s commitment to the south from 2006 to 2009, including $1.2 billion in aid and development is $4.3 billion. The human and financial investment is enormous and underscores the sea change Afghanistan has created in Canadian foreign policy.

Afghanistan and the Revival of the Canadian Armed Forces

Dubbed the “Decade of Darkness,” by Canada’s Chief of Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier in 2006, the budget cuts of the 1990s gutted Canada’s defence down to 1% of GDP and prevented Canada from replacing even the most obsolete pieces of equipment. The Canadian defence budget declined in real dollars from $12 billion in 1991 to $9.7 billion in 1999. As Douglas Bland, the ‘dean’ of Canadian defence management studies, has argued, Canada’s military was caught in an irreversible downward spiral towards collapse.

Only in 2000 were the cuts halted. Defence became a placeholder budget with just enough tiny increases here and there to prevent the collapse of major components of the forces. A small number of thirty-year-old tanks and fighter jets were upgraded while a larger number were parked for spare parts. The Paul Martin government was the first to promise major renewal projects to take effect in the end of the decade.

One of the first things the Stephen Harper government did was to up the 2005 Liberal promise of extra capital funding (above the base budget) from $13.6 billion to $17.6 billion. In both the 2006 and 2007 budgets, defence spending received its biggest increase since Brian Mulroney’s defence budget in 1984. The operations and maintenance budget of the Canadian Forces is also under great stress. The base budget of $15 billion is stretched to the limit. Many agree that an emergency appropriation for operations of $1 billion is needed.

The Harper government acted immediately upon its promises of military equipment purchases. It began ordering strategic, tactical, and theatre airlift, trucks, modern artillery and even tanks. All of these have direct application to the Afghan theatre. Four C-17 Globemasters are now on order. Also, the aging and badly over-stretched C-130 Hercules were pushed far beyond the limit by operational needs in Afghanistan. Sixteen new Hercules planes have been ordered. A new fleet of medium-sized trucks is in the procurement stage. Six M-777 towed howitzers were bought for immediate deployment. Canada’s lack of a large transport helicopter has made Canadian patrols and supply convoys vulnerable to insurgent attacks. Given the high demand for these helicopters, Canada may try to acquire about 16 Chinook helicopters directly from the US Army.

When the aging Leopard Tanks proved of great use both in terms of intimidating Taliban fighters and providing direct fire support during operation Medusa, the government decided to lease 20 modern 2A6M Leopards from the Germans ready for the summer 2007. Soon after, it announced the purchase of 100 used Leopard 2 tanks from the Dutch for $650 million.
Most of these purchases were badly needed given the rust out of Canadian Forces equipment. But it was operational needs in Kandahar that propelled them forward. Because the military needs this equipment today to save lives, the government resorted to off-the-shelf buying, bypassing the lengthy competitive bid process. This situation is a clear catch-22 as buying without competitive bidding may in fact drive up the long-term cost. The Harper government was criticized for this by Sheila Fraser, the Auditor General, in her March 2007 report.12

Between 2006 and 2009, nearly the entire combat strength of Canadian Forces is dedicated to the Afghan mission as one of Canada’s three battle groups will be in the South, one will just have returned, and one will be preparing to go. Recruitment targets for regular forces were exceeded in 2006-2007 with 6,426 new sign ups.13

Given that Canadian Forces are stretched to the limit, that training resources are scarce, and that equipment is wearing out, a break or temporary slow down in Canadian operations in 2009 may be wise. At the same time, the Canadian military from the top ranks to the privates are fully committed to see this struggle to the end.

Afghanistan and the Rapprochement in Canadian-American Relations

The human security initiatives developed by Lloyd Axworthy gradually set Canada on a collision course with American foreign policy even though Prime Minister Jean Chrétien got on well with President Bill Clinton.14 It is not that the Clinton government opposed the ideals of human security. But Axworthy coached a coalition of states that refused to consider any compromises. As a result, American vested military interests combined with overwhelming opposition in the US Senate pushed Clinton out of the human security agenda.

The US goodwill evaporated in 2001. The senior advisers in the George W. Bush administration were critical of the diplomatic gap that had emerged between Canada’s international political agenda and that of the United States. They were also outspoken about Canada’s ‘free-rider’ status in terms of North American defence spending. Canadian overtures in 2003 for a complementary role in military operations conducted by the European Union looked to Washington as undermining NATO.

The Bush-Chrétien relationship kept deteriorating on both foreign and domestic policy. Chrétien’s public and clumsy opposition to Bush’s policy on Iraq, plummeted the relationship to an icy low. Ottawa declined American invitations to join (cost-free) in continental missile defence even though potential North Korean and Iranian missiles would fly over Canadian aerospace. The American invitation to redesign the 1958 North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) from an integrated tactical warning and attack assessment into a larger bi-national command was turned down by Canada in early 2002.

Canada faced a border blockage on September 12 as a result of new US security policies on the long mutual border. Given the fact that Canadian imports and exports with the United States in 2005 amounted to 52% of Canadian GDP, any delay at the border threatened Canadian prosperity. Even though the two governments soon signed a ‘Smart Border Plan,’ security regulations are continuing to slow down trade. The cost to industry of waiting and processing at the border is now estimated at nearly 3% of total trade volume.15

Stephen Harper made it a priority to change the political relationship. He used a new Canadian commitment in Afghanistan and re-investment in Canadian defence as the way to build respect and political capital in Washington. Though there was not much time and credibility left in the NORAD negotiations in 2006, Harper managed to add a maritime warning function to the May 2006 renewal agreement.
The top-level governmental relationship improved markedly. As US Ambassador David Wilkins put it: "There's now a feeling of shared responsibility as we tackle problems and more of a, 'let's fix the problem' rather than trying to fix the blame. And that's positive for both of us."16

Harper sought an immediate negotiated end to the softwood lumber dispute that had lingered since 2001. The 2006 softwood lumber agreement erased numerous WTO and NAFTA disputes and rebated 80% of some $5 billion in Canadian paid levies since 2002.

Harper’s unambiguous assistance in the war on terror, his renewal of Canadian Forces, and the quick resolution of the lumber dispute, registered in Washington as a new beginning in bilateral cooperation.17 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted in September 2006 that Canada’s efforts in the South of Afghanistan were “critical” in the war against terror.18

**Afghanistan and the Political Debate in Canada**

Opinion polls show that while Canadians feel proud about their soldiers’ valour, there remains a lot of trepidation whether the Taliban and the drug lords can be defeated.19 Canadian public support for the war effort has hovered between 47% and 57% in 2006.20 The split in the public makes the issue fertile ground for partisan politics.

Tapping into perennial Anti-Americanism in Canada, the New Democratic Party under Jack Layton has depicted Canada’s role as pulling the chestnuts out of the fire for the Americans, despite the fact that some 20,000 American soldiers are doing so themselves. Layton has called for Canada to pull all its 2500 troops out of all combat and peace enforcement operations.21

French Quebecers are traditionally more reluctant than English Canadians about military deployments.22 Even a large element within the Liberal Party is mobilizing public opinion against Canada’s role in Afghanistan for the purpose preventing the Conservatives from becoming the alternative to the separatists in the next election. With only 124 seats in the 308 member House of Commons, Harper remains vulnerable to several combinations of opposition to his Afghanistan policy.

Harper’s first trip abroad was a visit to the troops in Afghanistan. In so doing, he underscored the national profile of the mission and his personal commitment to its success. Harper invoked Canada’s “warrior heritage," and argued that it was in Canada’s national interest to win in the war on terror.23 Harper narrowly won a Parliamentary mandate in 2006 for troops to stay committed till 2009. By early 2007, Canada had taken the highest level of casualties per capita among the non-US NATO members deployed in Afghanistan.

While the interim Liberal leader Bill Graham was supportive of Harper’s moves to increase the defence budget and further expand Canada’s military role in southern Afghanistan, the approach toward Afghanistan in the Liberal caucus began to fracture under its newly elected leader Stephane Dion. The Harper government was accused of doing too much fighting and not enough reconstruction. It was also criticized for not dealing with the growing production of poppy used for heroin which constitutes the bulk of Afghanistan’s GDP.24

The Harper government defended its policy by arguing that there was no disagreement on the need for reconstruction and that long-term security could not be obtained without it. However, it added, that reconstruction could not take hold until secure conditions were established and that Canada would not shrink away from that task. Just to be on the safe side politically, Harper announced in early 2007 that he would add another $100 million for
reconstruction and development projects for both 2007 and 2008 on top of the existing $100 million annual aid to Afghanistan that includes funds for police training, de-mining, road construction and counter-narcotics.  

In April 2007, the Liberal Party introduced a motion to make 2009 a binding exit for Canadian troops. Given Dion’s unpopularity, he made sure not to designate the motion as a vote of confidence. Supported by the Bloc Quebecois (50 seats), the Liberals could have easily won the motion if the anti-war NDP did not have its own worries about triggering an election (the rising Green Party). Thus, the NDP voted with the Conservatives on the interesting principle that being against the mission, it could not support a vote that would not close it down until 2009.

The opposition parties have grasped the opportunity to harass the government on its Afghan policy over allegations that Taliban prisoners taken by Canadian troops and handed over to Afghan authorities were mistreated or tortured. Even though Canadian troops are not accused of any wrongdoing and are obliged to hand prisoners over to the Afghan government, incomplete reporting by the Defence Minister Gordon O’Connor and accusations of blacked-out reports on the part of the Department of Foreign Affairs of these prisoners have allowed the opposition to doubt the moral high ground of the government.

Appeals to international morality and law do have sway with Canadian opinion makers, but even here the opposition has not gained much electoral ground. Canada is clearly pushing the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission for ways to monitor the condition of prisoners. Perhaps, some opposition politicians are trying to invoke the ghost of Abu Ghraib.

Still, Canadian public opinion remains jittery about Afghanistan. They worry whether NATO and the West can prevail. There clearly is some blowback from Iraq in the Canadian psyche. The opposition attempt to picture Afghanistan as Harper’s Iraq does sting. By May 2007, more people began to look for a so-called exit strategy.

**Afghanistan and the Future of Canada’s Commitment**

Most analyst agree that in 2003 the United States switched too much of its military attention to Iraq and subsequently allowed the security conditions to deteriorate in Afghanistan. At the same time, many nations pledged funds and troops but did not follow through. It was a case of “security with a light footprint.” By 2006, it was clear that Kandahar and its environs could be lost again to the Taliban. It is at this crucial strategic point that the Harper government stepped up to the plate. In Operation Medusa, Canada took a lead role alongside British and US forces, and later supported by Dutch troops, to drive back a Taliban offensive. If NATO’s operations indeed reached a “tipping point,” as British General David Richards put it in October of 2006, it seems the Alliance was able to tilt the balance back in its favour, and Canada was part of that hard tilt.

Still, attacks and terrorist incidents in Afghanistan have risen from about 100 to 150 per year in 2003 and 2004 to over 500 in 2006. The estimated death toll of these attacks was 600 for the January-September period in 2006 and is still climbing. More than 80% of the victims of suicide bombings since 2001 have been Afghan civilians. A 2007 report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington outlined the slippage in security, governance, and economic (re)construction. It added ominously, ‘2007 is the breaking point.”

Thirty-seven nations and numerous international organizations are today involved in the security and reconstruction of Afghanistan. In 2007, NATO will have over 41,000 troops on the ground. Without NATO, Afghanistan has little chance of stabilizing. Of the 21,000 American troops in the country, 11,000 have been put under NATO command, showing the
depth of the US stake in the success of NATO’s mission. The invitation of the NATO Secretary General to the Bush ranch in May 2007 also underscores this point.\textsuperscript{33}

Though NATO provides much needed security, it is only one of the ingredients needed for ultimate success. The other elements are development assistance and reconstruction, military and policy efforts to translate security into stability, and more governance capacity on the part of Afghan government. On all three scores, the mission is still in its early stages.

It is estimated that in 2006, Afghanistan only received $1.5 billion in development aid\textsuperscript{34} Compared to international efforts in Bosnia and Kosovo, aid per capita to Afghans has been low; $50 in 2006. Aid per capita in the other two war-ravaged countries was $800 and $400 respectively.\textsuperscript{35} Some studies suggest that aid per capita should at least double to $100 for stability operations to even gain a foothold.\textsuperscript{36} Some 1000 schools, clinics and government buildings have been built in the last five years.\textsuperscript{37} At the same time, Taliban and insurgents often attack these to undo the achievements.

In terms of troops on the ground—which is believed to be a major deterrent to insurgent attacks—ISAF has only has 6 soldiers for every 100 square kilometres. In Bosnia, NATO deployed about 117 soldiers for the same area right after the hostilities and even today there are more soldiers per 1000 population in Bosnia than in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{38}

Many Afghans react negatively to foreigners. Still, it is wrong to conclude that the Taliban has the support of the local population. Polls done in the last two years show that upwards from 90\% of the respondents do not want a return of Taliban rule. While confidence in the Hamid Karzai government and NATO was slipping in 2005 and 2006, this does not translate into more support for the Taliban. Rather, widespread corruption and the lack of speedy reconstruction explain the rise in popular critique of the Karzai government. Foreign troops (both US and NATO) are supported by more than 70\% of the population.\textsuperscript{39} Many tribal and village leaders work with the PRT’s and the latter’s success depends on the endorsement they receive from local authorities.

Though Taliban fighters are usually soundly defeated in any conventional battle, they have a “seemingly inexhaustible supply of recruits, enjoy sanctuary in Pakistan, and almost certainly have greater staying power than the foreign troops.”\textsuperscript{40} The targets in the Afghanistan Compact agreed between the Karzai government and international participants in London in 2006 included an Afghan stability capability of 70,000 for the army and some 60,000 for the Police forces. Especially the latter task is still in its early stage. This year, the American government promised $1 billion to train and finance this fledgling police force.

The supply of insurgent fighters is greatly complicated by the fact that the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is porous, that Pakistan’s president Pervez Musharraf does not command control over large areas of Northwest Pakistan, and that a large amount of the insurgency is financed by the international poppy trade.

Pakistan considers Afghanistan part of its strategic space in its tense relationship with India. Given that both the tribal and regional strategic dynamics link the two states, the future stability of any central government in Afghanistan depends as much on Pakistani cooperation as on stabilizing conditions on the ground in Afghanistan. NATO should try to be the bridge to help both governments cooperate on stability operations. Boosting economic ties with Pakistan must also form part of a Western strategy to create incentives for regional cooperation.

Afghanistan is the source of nine-tenths of the world’s heroin. Poppy is estimated to be nine times more lucrative for the grower than wheat and is estimated at 40\% of Afghanistan’s GDP.\textsuperscript{41} The poppy economy is the biggest temptation for corruption inside the Karzai
government and, ironically, is the largest source of Taliban income. A crop eradication program may drive farmers into the arms of the insurgency. A crop substitution plan is urgently needed. Pakistan is currently blocking Afghanistan’s traditional trading relation with India.

Any fair-minded comparative perspective on the situation in Afghanistan would suggest that reaching the objectives of stability, governance and reconstruction will take upwards from 10 years. For NATO nations, including Canada, this objective specifically means providing enough military strength on the ground until insurgents and ethnic factions realize that the movement towards a stable central government in Kabul is irreversible. Ultimately, this ‘end state’ precludes the return of Taliban rule, but it does not preclude negotiations with moderate Taliban factions—if such emerge—for the purpose of their integration into Afghanistan’s new government. The daunting challenge of subsuming the political culture of warlords and tribal leaders into democratic institutions, including police and army may require this step.

Canadian opposition parties’ clamour for the return to light peacekeeping and mostly humanitarian assistance as the centre piece of Canadian foreign policy is unrealistic and unhelpful for the long-term future of Afghanistan. With this constant political pressure on his back, Defence Minister Gordon O’Connor indicated in early April 2007 that when some of the targets of security, governance and reconstruction are reached, NATO and Canadian troop commitments could be scaled down and even withdrawn by 2010.

This target date is too optimistic. With the right burden-sharing inside NATO in which other NATO members such as Germany, France, Italy and Spain also take turns in the challenging theatre in the South of Afghanistan, Canada should take some time to replenish and then return to the effort.

The revolution in Canadian foreign policy means that the country no longer speaks loudly while carrying a small stick. Instead, Canadian hard security efforts in the south of Afghanistan are laying the groundwork for long-term success in securing peace and nation building. The revolution in Canadian foreign policy is finally re-investing in one of the finest militaries in the world and is creating a much stronger context for Canadian-American relations. It will ultimately lead to greater respect for Canadian interests and values in the international community.

Alexander Moens is a professor of political science at Simon Fraser University and a Fellow of the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute. The author would like to thank the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute and the Netherlands Atlantic Association for their support in writing this article.

Notes
34. Jones, p. 122.
37. Paris, p. 36.
38. Smith, p. 19.
41. Ibid.
43. Jones, p. 120.